



Pedagogy of Nonconformity in Dead Poets Society: Institutional Discipline versus Individual Consciousness

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Abstract— Educational institutions often present themselves as neutral spaces of intellectual cultivation, yet critical theory has consistently shown that schooling frequently operates as a mechanism of regulation and ideological reproduction. *Dead Poets Society* (1989) explores this paradox through its portrayal of an elite boarding school where conformity is normalized as excellence. This paper examines pedagogy in the film as a site of tension between institutional discipline and individual consciousness. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and Paulo Freire's concept of critical pedagogy, the study argues that nonconformity in the film is neither romantic rebellion nor individual failure, but a structurally constrained ethical position. Through close textual analysis, the paper demonstrates how authority at Welton Academy functions through internalized obedience, symbolic legitimacy, and emotional repression. While John Keating's pedagogical approach disrupts passive learning and awakens critical reflection, it remains limited by its individualistic orientation and lack of institutional support. The film ultimately reveals that the awakening of consciousness, when unsupported by structural transformation, may intensify vulnerability rather than enable freedom, raising enduring questions about pedagogical responsibility.



Keywords— Critical Consciousness, Education, Institutional Power, Nonconformity, Pedagogy

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is frequently imagined as a neutral process devoted to intellectual development and social mobility. However, critical theorists have long challenged this assumption, arguing that schooling often reproduces dominant ideologies and social hierarchies rather than interrogating them (Foucault, 1977; Freire, 1970; Dewey, 1938; Illich, 1971). Within this critical tradition, education is understood not merely as knowledge transmission but as a formative process shaping identity, aspiration, and obedience.

Dead Poets Society situates this debate within the elite setting of Welton Academy, an institution governed by rigid traditions and moral absolutism. Rather than presenting rebellion as an uncomplicated moral victory, the film foregrounds the psychological and ethical costs of resisting authority within an inflexible system. This paper argues that the central conflict of the film lies in the

imbalance between awakened individual consciousness and the durability of institutional discipline. Pedagogy, in this context, becomes a contested space where freedom is encouraged but structurally constrained.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with *Dead Poets Society* has largely revolved around its representation of education, authority, and the figure of the inspirational teacher. Early cultural analyses interpreted the film as a cinematic endorsement of progressive pedagogy, emphasizing its challenge to rote learning and authoritarian schooling (Giroux, 2002). Giroux situates the film within a broader political critique of education, arguing that it dramatizes the tension between democratic ideals and institutional conservatism, while simultaneously cautioning that such narratives often personalize systemic conflict by locating resistance in

exceptional individuals rather than collective structures (Giroux, 2002). Hooks similarly frames emancipatory education as an affective and dialogic practice, yet warns that liberation-centered pedagogy risks ethical incompleteness when emotional awakening is not accompanied by institutional accountability (Hooks, 1994)]. These insights are central to the present paper, which extends this critique by examining how *Dead Poets Society* exposes the structural vulnerability produced when individual consciousness is awakened within rigid disciplinary systems.

Theoretical perspectives on institutional power further illuminate the film's pedagogical conflict. Foucault's analysis of disciplinary institutions demonstrates how schools regulate individuals through internalized norms rather than overt coercion, producing compliant subjects who self-police behavior and aspiration (Foucault, 1977). Althusser complements this view by conceptualizing education as an ideological state apparatus that reproduces dominant values through cultural legitimacy rather than force (Althusser, 1971). Bourdieu deepens this analysis by showing how institutions delimit the horizon of possible identities, rendering deviation psychologically and socially costly (Bourdieu, 1990). When applied to *Dead Poets Society*, these frameworks reveal Welton Academy not merely as a conservative school but as a self-reproducing system that forecloses meaningful dissent.

Critical pedagogy offers a contrasting but incomplete alternative. Freire's rejection of the "banking model" of education emphasizes dialogue, praxis, and consciousness-raising as foundations of humanization (Freire, 1970). Dewey similarly advocates experiential learning rooted in reflection and lived experience (Dewey, 1938). However, contemporary scholars caution that pedagogical freedom detached from structural reform may inadvertently intensify precarity rather than empowerment (Biesta, 2017; Todd, 2015). This tension is central to the present study, which argues that Keating's pedagogy, while ethically motivated remains constrained by its individualistic and aesthetic orientation. By synthesizing classic and contemporary scholarship, this paper positions *Dead Poets Society* as a critical text that reveals both the necessity and the limits of pedagogical nonconformity within institutional power.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EDUCATION, POWER AND SUBJECT FORMATION

This study approaches education as a formative social practice rather than a neutral intellectual exercise. Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power provides a foundational framework for understanding how institutions

shape compliant subjects through normalization and internalized regulation rather than direct coercion (Foucault, 1977). Within such systems, authority becomes effective precisely because it is experienced as personal duty rather than external force.

Louis Althusser's concept of education as an ideological state apparatus further clarifies this process. Schools do not merely transmit skills or knowledge; they reproduce dominant values by embedding ideology within routine practices such as discipline, assessment, and tradition (Althusser, 1971). Bourdieu extends this insight by demonstrating how institutions define the limits of aspiration, shaping what individuals perceive as possible or permissible (Bourdieu, 1990). Together, these perspectives allow Welton Academy to be read as a system that governs desire as much as behavior.

Against this disciplinary model stands the tradition of critical pedagogy. Paulo Freire emphasizes dialogue and reflection as essential to humanization, rejecting educational practices that reduce learners to passive recipients of authority (Freire, 1970). John Dewey similarly argues that education must be rooted in lived experience and reflective engagement rather than rote transmission (Dewey, 1938). However, recent pedagogical theorists caution that the awakening of consciousness without structural support may intensify vulnerability rather than enable freedom (Biesta, 2017; Todd, 2015). This unresolved tension frames the analysis that follows.

IV. INSTITUTIONAL DISCIPLINE AT WELTON ACADEMY

Welton Academy exemplifies the subtle efficiency of disciplinary power. Its celebrated values of tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence function not only as moral ideals but as mechanisms of ideological control. Drawing on Althusser's framework, the school can be understood as an institution that secures obedience by presenting conformity as virtue (Althusser, 1971).

Foucault's claim that discipline operates most effectively through internalization is evident in the students' conduct (Foucault, 1977). Surveillance is rarely explicit, yet it is omnipresent through academic evaluation, parental expectation, and peer regulation. Fear of failure and disappointment becomes the primary mode of control, rendering overt punishment largely unnecessary.

Neil Perry's conflict illustrates how such institutions restrict the horizon of possibility. His desire to pursue acting does not reject excellence but challenges its narrow definition. As Bourdieu suggests, institutions shape not only outcomes but the very conditions under which

alternatives can be imagined (Bourdieu, 1990). Neil's tragedy thus emerges from an environment that denies negotiation and plurality rather than from individual defiance alone.

V. KEATING'S PEDAGOGY AND THE LIMITS OF AWAKENING

John Keating's pedagogy disrupts Welton's authoritarian logic by emphasizing poetry, imagination, and reflective thought. His teaching aligns with Dewey's view of education as an experiential process and Freire's insistence on dialogue as a means of critical engagement (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970). By encouraging students to question authority, Keating unsettles internalized obedience and invites intellectual self-awareness.

However, Keating's approach remains largely individualistic and aesthetic. While it awakens critical reflection, it does not address the institutional structures that constrain student agency. Jacques Rancière's critique of pedagogical emancipation is relevant here. He warns that intellectual awakening without structural equality risks reinforcing dependency rather than producing genuine freedom (Rancière, 1991).

Keating's ethical limitation lies in his failure to prepare students for institutional resistance. By encouraging nonconformity without providing strategies for negotiation or collective support, he inadvertently exposes students to retaliation. His pedagogy challenges authority symbolically but leaves its material foundations intact.

VI. MASCULINITY, SILENCE, AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION

The film also reveals how elite educational institutions enforce restrictive models of masculinity. Scholars have shown that such environments privilege emotional restraint, competitiveness, and achievement-oriented identity (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2012). Within this framework, vulnerability is interpreted as weakness rather than as a legitimate human response.

Neil's inability to articulate distress reflects this emotional regulation. Erikson's work on adolescent identity formation underscores how the denial of autonomy during this developmental stage intensifies psychological conflict (Erikson, 1968). In a setting where emotional expression is discouraged, nonconformity becomes isolating rather than empowering.

Silence functions as a form of compliance, and emotional repression becomes a condition of belonging. The film thus suggests that institutional discipline operates not only

through rules and evaluation but through affective control. This dimension complicates romantic interpretations of rebellion by foregrounding its psychological cost.

VII. CONSCIOUSNESS WITHOUT STRUCTURE

The central paradox of the film lies in the awakening of individual consciousness within an unchanged institutional framework. Keating's pedagogy disrupts internalized obedience, yet Welton's disciplinary structure remains intact. As Foucault argues, institutions preserve stability by isolating dissent and attributing disruption to individual actors rather than systemic conditions (Foucault, 1977).

Keating's dismissal exemplifies this process. Responsibility is displaced onto the teacher, allowing the institution to reaffirm its authority without self-examination. The students' final act of standing on their desks is morally resonant, yet it remains symbolically contained. It affirms ethical conviction without producing structural change.

Contemporary educational theorists caution that inspiration detached from institutional responsibility risks ethical fragility (Biesta, 2017; Todd, 2015; Ball, 2016; Giroux, 2019). Hannah Arendt's reflections on authority further illuminate this tension, suggesting that institutions fail not through rebellion alone but through their refusal to acknowledge responsibility for plurality and dissent (Arendt, 1968). The film ultimately resists closure, offering instead a sober reflection on the limits of pedagogical idealism.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that *Dead Poets Society* offers more than a familiar narrative of inspirational teaching. Read closely, the film exposes the fragile position of individual consciousness when it is awakened within institutions that remain structurally unchanged. Nonconformity, in this context, appears neither heroic nor futile, but deeply contingent, shaped by systems that quietly regulate aspiration, emotion, and silence.

One of the strengths of this study lies in its attempt to read pedagogy as an ethical practice rather than a set of methods. By bringing together theories of disciplinary power and critical education, the paper moves away from character-based moral judgments and toward a consideration of institutional responsibility. This approach helps clarify why Keating's pedagogy, despite its sincerity, remains incomplete, and why the consequences of awakening cannot be separated from the structures in which it occurs.

The analysis also has its limits. Focusing on a single film necessarily restricts the scope of its claims, and the interpretive nature of the study leaves certain questions open. The voices of students themselves, for instance, remain mediated through narrative and representation rather than lived experience. These gaps point toward possible extensions, including comparative work across literary and cinematic texts, or dialogue with empirical studies of contemporary educational environments.

Even with these limitations, the paper has practical and conceptual relevance. It invites educators to reflect on the risks involved in encouraging critical thinking without institutional support, and it suggests that inspiration alone cannot substitute for structural care. For literary and cultural studies, the film stands as a reminder that narratives of education often reveal as much about power and responsibility as they do about learning. If *Dead Poets Society* endures, it is not because it offers solutions, but because it leaves us with questions that remain difficult, and necessary, to face

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